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AUTHOR	Lyman, Richard W.
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ABSTRACT

The president of an independent university asks why, in the face of a decline in the private educational sector in the United States, this sector cannot be left unmonitored but well supported in order to make its contribution to American society. His answer, or argument, is twofold. First, the tide appears to be running against the private sector in American life generally. There is concern not for equality of opportunity but for equality of results; there is a new-found passion for rationalizing the allocation and use of resources throughout our society. Secondly, the case for survival and support is subtle and difficult to make. The defense argues from the overall advantages of pluralism to society and from the viewpoint that the contribution of independent schools derives from the variety and individual uniqueness. The suggested course of action begins with making the best possible case for pluralism. A second and related point is to improve understanding of other institutions and individuals involved with independent schools. Next, it must be demonstrated that the claims of excellence and individuality have been lived up to. Lastly, those in independent educational institutions must retain their capacity both to innovate and, where it is important to do so, to resist innovation. (Author/KSM)

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PLURALISM IN EDUCATION

The following remarks were delivered by Richard W. Lyman, President of Stanford University, on March 21, 1974, at the first general session of the 1974 Annual Conference of the National Association of Independent Schools and the California Association of Independent Schools.

I have spent my whole professional life in the independent or private sector of higher education, and clearly the independent schools and the private colleges and universities have much in common. We share many problems; we also share some significant values and advantages.

Our budgets are squeezed. (That's a problem, not an advantage. I've not yet joined those who are proclaiming how good it is for the soul to find oneself going broke.) Even the most fortunate of us are having a tougher time financially. None of us can contemplate the future with equanimity if present trends continue.

Many of us are encountering problems in maintaining enrollments without either lowering academic standards or making ability-to-pay an important criterion of admission. This is all the more disturbing because it comes just as we are trying to do our full share in the enrollment and education of disadvantaged students—an effort we are absolutely unwilling to abandon.

We share also the experience of increased competition from improved schools in the public sector, which is intensified by our ever-increasing expensiveness to the student, compared with tax-supported institutions.

In higher education, the private sector held steady for years at about one half of total enrollments in the United States. Then around 1950 our share began to decline. By 1972 it had fallen to 24 per cent, and there is no end in sight. At the primary and secondary school levels a similar story could be told, although of course the private sector's share has not in modern times approached 50 per cent.

Perhaps, incidentally, we in the Western states can bring some comfort to Eastern colleagues on this score. We've never held as prominent a position in terms of enrollment in our region as you have in yours, yet we've survived. In California, for example, the private sector's share of total enrollments in higher education is only 10 per cent. But we don't feel as if we're living on the brink of institutional extinction.

Yet it is difficult for Americans to adjust happily or without loss of morale to a situation of no growth—and in relative terms, at least, of decline. Living in a society in which Growth has long been held synonymous with Progress; in which no problem was too difficult, provided that there was always more each year in the way of resources to work with; in which it has been considered a truism that if you're not advancing you must be retreating, and if you're retreating you must be defeated, and if you're defeated you must be disgraced; in such a society it's disconcerting, to put it mildly, to find ourselves in more or less straitened circumstances, and probably occupying a declining share of the enrollment turf, as far ahead as the eye can see.

We know that our hearts are pure and our merit is great. Why doesn't everyone else recognize this and leave us

alone—or rather, leave us unmonitored but well supported, so that we are free to make the enormous contribution to American society that we have it in us to make?

The answer in brief is twofold.

First, we are swimming against very powerful tides.

Second, our case for survival and support is a rather subtle one and difficult to make.

First, a word about the tides. They are running against the private sector in American life generally. The watchwords are equality and cost effectiveness, or (if you prefer) rational planning for the allocation of resources.

There is nothing new about egalitarianism in this country. De Tocqueville in the early nineteenth century already saw it as the hallmark of democracy in America. But today it is assuming new forms and taking on renewed vigor.

It is powerfully—and entirely understandably—reinforced by the long-overdue drive toward equitable treatment on the part of blacks and Chicanos and other ethnic minorities, against whom the walls of prejudice stood for too long invulnerable—a drive now joined by a minority so large as to be a majority, the 51 per cent of Americans who are female.

Partly as a result of frustration at the slowness of our progress on this front, however, a tendency is rapidly developing which, as Daniel Bell and others have pointed out, alters quite drastically the *meaning* of the search for equality. According to this new tendency, equality of opportunity is not enough; what must be guaranteed is equality of result. More and more Americans are not satisfied with the ideal of an equal start in life; they demand an equal finish as well.

One is irresistibly reminded of the Caucus Race in *Alice in Wonderland*:

> 'What is a Caucus-race?' said Alice; not that she much wanted to know, but the Dodo had paused as if it thought that somebody ought to speak.
>
> 'Why,' said the Dodo, 'the best way to explain it is to do it.'
>
> First it marked out a racecourse, in a sort of circle ('the exact shape doesn't matter,' it said), and then all the party were placed along the course, here and there. There was no 'One, two, three, and away,' but they began running when they liked, and left off when they liked, so that it was not easy to know when the race was over. However, when they had been running a half an hour or so . . . the Dodo suddenly called out 'The race is over!' and they all crowded round it, panting and asking 'But who has won?'
>
> This question the Dodo could not answer without a great deal of thought, and it sat for a long time with one finger pressed upon its forehead . . . while the rest waited in silence. At last the Dodo said 'Everybody has won, and all must have prizes.'

And in Lewis Carroll's own country we are seeing exactly what "equality of results" means to the private sector in secondary education, in the form of the Labour party's announced determination first to remove the tax advantages and government support now enjoyed by Eton, Harrow, Rugby, and the rest, and then to wipe them out entirely by making it illegal to charge fees for full-time school attendance. The rationale, in the words of Roy Hattersley, M.P., is clear and simple: "Competitive education, which allows the few to leap further and further ahead, insures that the less fortunate fall further and further behind. That is why the pursuit of equality of opportunity has to be replaced by the pursuit of equality itself" (*New York Times*, 12/19/73).

The notion that one student's progress necessarily implies another's failure may seem preposterous. Yet we are hearing logic like Mr. Hattersley's more and more often in this country. We would be foolish not to consider ourselves forewarned by the British example.

Perhaps equally threatening is the newfound passion for rationalizing the allocation and use of resources throughout our society. At both the national and state levels, a new educational planet has been discovered in recent years. It is called "postsecondary education." It is a very diverse sort of place, in which proprietary schools of hairdressing or massage techniques rub elbows with Yale and Berkeley, Cal Tech and the City University of New York.

The mere sight of so vast and miscellaneous a category of institutions was bound to set bureaucratic mouths to watering and legislative eyebrows to twitching. It was bound, in short, to whet the ever-present appetite for controlling, in the guise of coordinating. And so we are seeing the creation of new authorities, armed with fresh powers of investigation and recommendation, sometimes even outright implementation, whose task it is to eliminate inefficiency and duplication throughout the private and public sectors alike. These so-called "superboards" oversee not only the tax-supported institutions of higher education but the privately supported, and can shape or limit the latter virtually as if they were parts of the state system.

It is difficult, as I guess my last few remarks amply demonstrate, to talk about these things in the sober, balanced way that avoids extreme statement and protects against the charge of having resorted to that most ignoble of logical fallacies, the *reductio ad absurdum*. No one denies the need for a reasonable degree of coordination, or for care and thoughtfulness in the allocation of resources. The fact remains that the private sector, in its great variety, in its lack of direct accountability to publicly elected legislative bodies, stands tragically vulnerable to the seductive logic—and even more seductive rhetoric—of uniform cost accounting, coordination of objectives, and standardization of policies and practices.

Our defense is overwhelmingly dependent upon two main lines of argument, each of which has its limitations. More accurately—for I really believe that our case is a very strong one—both of these lines of argument are in one way or another difficult to get across to the general public.

First, we must perforce argue from the over-all advantages to society of pluralism. We believe—and there is lots of evidence to support us—that a society is more likely to be open and free, that the individual citizen's capacity to stand up against the otherwise overwhelming force of modern government is substantially strengthened, if the state does not possess a monopoly of service to the public; if side by side with great public school systems there are strong independent schools; if competing with the great publicly supported universities there are fine privately endowed ones; and so on.

The classic defense of the pluralist society, I suppose, is that of Edmund Burke, toward the close of the eight-

eenth century, stimulated (or provoked) by the French Revolution. The revolutionaries, Burke argued, in their zeal for liberty and equality in the abstract, were busily tearing down all of the intermediate corporate bodies and parochial loyalties that stood between the individual and the State. These "little platoons," as Burke called them, were attacked in the name of the most high-sounding principles: down with feudal distinctions, down with the special privileges of the guilds and the obscurantism and greed of the eighteenth-century Church. But the result of thus wiping the slate clean, Burke concluded, was to leave the individual defenseless and alone, confronted by the power of an all-encompassing State, which was theoretically his, but over which he had in actuality little or no control.

The message was in some ways a whisper thrown into the teeth of a hurricane. Yet it has startling contemporary relevance. We, who are responsible for the continuing health of our "little platoons"—and even the greatest of the private universities are "little platoons" when matched against the dimensions of state-supported higher education—we have our work cut out for us, and we don't have a Burke to lend eloquence to our cause.

The difficulty is that the argument is so intangible. We know what it's like to live in a society that *has* the private sector; few of us have thought much about what it's like to live in one that does not. For the most part we have not pondered very deeply the loss of social energy and the diminished quality of life that accompany the absence of private foundations, privately supported educational institutions, and independent social and cultural organizations. Thus, the cry of "Pluralism in danger!" is likely to produce nothing more than a stifled yawn. No latter-day Paul Revere is likely to bring out the Minutemen by shouting it down the village streets. Compared with easily grasped concepts such as "equality" and "efficiency," pluralism needs more than a skillful press agent to hold its own.

Our other principal line of argument suffers from almost the opposite difficulty. It relates to the *particular* contributions or virtues of *particular* parts of the private sector. It is, after all, our proudest boast that we are full of variety, individually unique. This is in fact the other side of the pluralist coin. Our contribution derives from the fact that we are not an easily-generalized-about mass. Haverford College is the only Haverford College there is, and though it may resemble Amherst in some ways and Swarthmore in others, it isn't a duplicate of either, or of any other institution one could cite. The same is, or ought to be, true of each of your member institutions. Unless it is the case, the argument for the private sector can hardly be sustained.

Yet the weakness inherent in this line of approach is also clear. Divided we may all too possibly fall, and yet unless we stay divided to some extent, unless we cherish our differentness, we lose our reason for existence.

Faced with all this, what can we do to help ourselves?

First, whatever the difficulties, we must make the case for pluralism as best we can. We might well begin at home: How well do we do at providing opportunities for our own students to learn about the distinctiveness of this aspect of American society? Do they know that only in Britain and in some countries of the erstwhile British Commonwealth is there anything like the blend of public and private institutions serving the social good that exists in this country?

How much attention does this fact—and its consequences—receive in our own courses that deal with the history, structure, and performance of social institutions? I find that thoughtful Americans are often taken by surprise when they travel abroad and discover that Edmund Burke's "little platoons" are largely nonexistent in one country after another. If the unique strengths of a pluralist society are little known and seldom recognized among our own students and graduates, how can we expect that the public at large will understand them? Over and over again, I encounter evidence that students at Stanford do not see the importance of the independent sector in higher education. Nor do they see the connections between that sector and the other branches of privately supported educational, cultural, and social enterprise, ranging from the United Fund to the Urban League, from the Metropolitan Opera to the Sierra Club.

Obviously I am not proposing that we embark upon a program of indoctrination, which would imply uncritical applause for all that can be labeled "private sector." But when sheer inattention and lack of information are so clearly part of our problem, we cannot afford to neglect opportunities for education in this subject that is so vital to our institutional well-being.

Second, but a related point: we can understand each other better, and the interests and values we hold in common.

Admittedly, at one time there was in a sense too *much* solidarity, too *much* cozy togetherness within the private sector. The notorious "old boy network" existed as a web of relationships blocking the path toward genuine equality of opportunity. There were special relationships between certain private schools and certain private colleges and universities, both parties generally of the elite variety. These relationships went beyond what can reasonably be defended, in a society that really cherishes the right of every person to realize his or her full potential. Few such relationships remain. Some of you may well regret their disappearance. Salvation for the private sector is not to be found in their restoration, however.

At the same time, I am troubled by the possibility of overreaction. What begins as salutary reform can easily wind up as reverse discrimination. Where an independent school has maintained an unusually high standard of academic achievement, it is folly for the independent colleges and universities to deny recognition of that fact. Scorn for "preppies" as a group is as misplaced and mischievous as any other act of invidious stereotyping. I would suggest to my faculty and administrative colleagues in private colleges across the country that we be careful, lest we find ourselves inadvertently sawing at the limb we're all perched on.

Third, we must be prepared to demonstrate that we have in fact lived up to our claims, that we do care about excellence and individuality, not as catchwords but as the guiding principles of our institutional lives. Under pressure of declining enrollments, this will often be tough to accomplish. But one virtue that ought to be within the reach of

independent institutions, be they old or new, famous or obscure, is that of rigorous self-definition. Excellence need not always wear the same face. There are excellent ways to further the learning of the not-so-bright, as well as excellent ways of encouraging geniuses. But we of the private sector ought to do everything we can to avoid complacency and self-delusion on this score. It would be tragic to allow market pressures to do the job of standardizing us even before the superboards and regulatory powers of the state can do it. To put it in a single sentence, if the private sector does not cherish excellence and individuality, in season and out, it will not *deserve* to survive.

Further, we in independent educational institutions must retain our capacity both to innovate and, where it is important to do so, to resist innovation. Again, it is a matter of our relatively greater freedom to define our own objectives for ourselves, without waiting for direction from public authorities. In this respect I wonder whether private higher education doesn't have a lot to learn from the independent secondary schools. To quote the Dean of Admissions at Stanford, Fred Hargardon, "The best of the independent school teachers probably have more to tell us, as a group, about how students grow and grope and grasp than any other group of teachers in the country." That wisdom has not come from reinventing the curriculum every year, or from feeling a sense of guilt any time the school does the same thing twice. Only by a wise blending of the best in new approaches with the best in proven ones will we be able to provide those examples of truly excellent teaching and learning on which our survival depends.

It may well be that what I have said here errs on the side of pessimism about the forces that threaten us, and about our own capacity to respond creatively and successfully. I do not apologize for that; I'm sometimes tempted to agree with H. L. Mencken's sour prediction that "the last sound to issue from a human gullet will be three cheers from the last optimist." But we in the private sector do have, after all, some potent advantages. We may yet find ourselves, like clever and adaptable mammals, well able to survive while Brontosaurus dies out for lack of those very qualities. People everywhere are yearning for the chance to feel significant as individuals. They are yearning for institutions built on a human scale and responsive to human needs and aspirations. Is not this precisely what we have believed in and worked for, long before it became so popular to do so? Perhaps for all of the formidable difficulties we face, we should look at our predicament today in the immortal words of Pogo: "We are faced with an insurmountable opportunity." Or, if you prefer history to fiction, we might recall the exclamation of the great French commander in World War I, Marshal Foch, at a moment of critical difficulty when everything seemed to be going against him: "My center is giving way, my right is pushed back—excellent! I'll attack!"

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